

## Sermon for September 27: Lessons for the 17th Sunday After Pentecost

I complained all week about my poor planning of having to preach a stewardship sermon on lessons that don't give me any good material.

Where are Jesus' sayings like "You cannot serve God and wealth" or

"Go, sell all you you have and give the money to the poor" when you need them?

The lessons today are not about the enormous problem of money idolatry in Jesus' day or in our own; they are not about the remedy for that idolatry that is available by giving.

Instead, today's lessons are about the church, this wondrous, sometimes frustrating, and yet life-giving, sacred community.

In this section of James, he speaks about a church for all the season's of a human's life.

If you are suffering, he says, take up prayer and get the church praying with you.

If you are cheerful, sing a song of praise; and not a solo; indeed gather the chorus of your sister and brother Christians.

If you are sick, call the minister and the vestry. Ask for a visit; tell him to bring the oil.

And even if your science says that healing is mostly done at the hospital, trust that the Holy Spirit still works in prayer for the good of you in totality,

For you are body, soul, spirit, mind and they are in the blessed communion that is you in mystical ways that are beyond comprehension.

James says also that the church should hunt down its wandering members. Now that might be related to stewardship time!

It is a poor reflection of the church in the 21st century that we are never so intent on finding our lost members as at stewardship time.

This hunting down is far from our general habit; yet the earliest Christians did not imagine their church to be a voluntary society, from which people came and went.

It was instead an organic unity, a Body in fact, that was pained deeply by the loss of any member.

So James sees the church as an enduring community charged with ministry from womb to tomb, from cradle to grave;

The church is for every season of your life.

I have admitted that there is nothing about money in this passage.

But isn't it suggestive?

It is hard to imagine the church flourishing in every season and being an organic unity with some serious thought and commitments about money.

We manifest our commitment to one another by worshiping together, studying together, playing together.

We manifest our commitment to one another by caring for one another in illness and sadness.

We manifest our commitment to one another by celebrating together when times are good.

And in a world that runs on money, we manifest our commitment to one another by giving, by the interpenetration of our financial lives.

Giving is one of the clearest ways that we can signal that we are serious about having a truly common life as a church family; giving draws us together as almost nothing else can, because sacrifice is an abiding sign of commitment.

We know that from looking to the Cross of Jesus Christ.

You know that also in marriage and parenting and extended family, in those

other organic relationships you enjoy.

James prays for church to be like that.

I have to say a word about the difficult Gospel lesson.

It is about the church as well.

The first half of the lesson, the bit about the disciples trying to shut down the ministry of others, that is about keeping the barriers to entry into our common life reasonably low.

If you can say "Jesus is Lord," you are sure to be welcome in this community of faith.

And it is also about taking our allies as we can find them.

Those who stand against the demonic forces that threaten God's people, against materialism, violence, and idolatry, even if they not do all the official actions of church membership, they are with us.

Those who relieve the the thirsty and hungry, even if they not do all the official actions of church membership, even if they do not have the wholeness of the catholic faith, they are with us.

We need not be like the gate-keeping disciples, trying to preserve a monopoly on doing good.

The second, grisly half of the lesson about removing various parts of your body is, however, about removing members of the church who do evil.

If we are to accept allies readily, we are also **not** to tolerate false disciples in our midst.

And these are not the petty faults of human beings trying to live in community.

These are the greater of evils of those who misuse the church's authority; persons who have used their position in the church to prey on the vulnerable.

There is no place for fear in the Body of Christ; there is no season in which Christ will permit us tolerate abuse, aggression, pain, or secrets.

We have a much higher calling, to be at peace with one another and to reconcile the world to God through Christ.

So my prayer is that our stewardship season will be a season in which the depth of our commitment to one another becomes ever clearer.

As we say each time we baptize in this place:

There is one God and Father of all;  
One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism;  
There is one hope in God's call to us;  
There is One Spirit.  
And we are One Body.